

GREAT STAUGHTON AND ITS PEOPLE

**HOW A HUNTINGDONSHIRE VILLAGE MADE ITS MARK ON ENGLAND'S
HISTORY**

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The South African Campaign 1899–1902

When the Second Boer War broke out on 11 October 1899, the reaction of the British public was an upsurge in patriotic fervour that saw no fewer than 100,000 responding to the call to arms. Great Staughton was no exception and in 1902, following the signing of the peace treaty, the church and parish magazine listed all the volunteers from the village who had served in the South African Campaign. A commemorative brass was erected in the church dedicated to three Staughton men who lost their lives as a result of the campaign: Private Edward Ernest Cowley; Private Arthur James Elmer and Private William Evans.

From the start, the Boers seized the initiative, besieging the important strategic towns of Mafeking, Kimberley and Ladysmith, inflicting heavy casualties on the mighty British Empire. Around 45,000 British troops were immediately despatched to South Africa to lift the sieges and restore British pride.

The relief of Kimberley proved to be a long, drawn-out affair, punctuated by four setbacks at Belmont, Graspan, Modder River and Magersfontein. One of the participants in the four battles was Grey William Duberly, born on 20 June 1875, one of seventeen Staughton volunteers who took part. Duberly was commissioned as a 2nd Lieutenant in the 3rd Battalion Grenadier Guards in May 1897 at the age of twenty-two. Two years later, his regiment was posted to Cape Colony to join Lord Methuen and his force of 9,000 men advancing to the relief of Kimberley.

Methuen's force followed the route of the main railway line, which ran to Kimberley and beyond to Mafeking. No attempt was made by Methuen or Buller to conceal the route the troops were to take and consequently the Boers were able to pick and choose the most favourable location to engage the British; Belmont station was to be the scene of the first encounter.

On 22 November 1899, Methuen's forces reached Belmont and pitched camp on the open veldt. Behind them, to the west, was the railway line; ahead, ten miles to the east was a line of five *kopjes* (small hills) all running approximately north–south, parallel to the railway line. The two nearest *kopjes*, Table Mount and Gun Hill, were to be the scene of the battle the next day. A force of 2,500 Boer commandos under General Jacobus Prinsloo occupied the heights of the five *kopjes*. British default strategy was to bombard enemy positions with heavy artillery and then advance in formation, firing as they went, until they could affix bayonets and finish the job. It had proved successful when the enemy was armed with nothing more effective than machetes and spears; against long-range smokeless German Mausers, wielded by highly skilled and experienced Boer marksmen, the strategy was to prove disastrous. The Boer commandos used their knowledge of the terrain to inflict terrible casualties on the British forces whilst sustaining minimal losses themselves; they were also imbued with the conviction that their cause was just. They proved to be a formidable enemy.

Methuen decided on a night march to outflank the enemy, sending the 9th Brigade to position themselves to the north of Table Mount, whilst Lieutenant Duberly's 3rd Battalion Grenadier Guards advanced under cover of darkness to the southern tip of Gun Hill. In a dawn attack the Boers would be caught in a pincer movement to the north and south whilst the bulk of Methuen's infantry would mount a frontal assault on the Boer positions at the top of the two *kopjes*.

The strategy might have worked if the maps had been accurate. As day dawned the Guards found themselves not on the Boer's left flank to the south of Gun Hill, as their maps had indicated, but on the open veldt in plain view of the deadly Mausers. British artillery ravaged the Boer

emplacements at the top of the *kopjes* and the Grenadier Guards advanced. Facing a murderous fusillade, Lieutenant Duberly and his men were forced to lie flat and, for a torrid thirty minutes, return fire as best as they could. Casualties were high but sheer numerical strength eventually saw British forces move rapidly up the slopes of the *kopje*. As they were about to affix bayonets, the Boers abruptly left their positions, raced down the hill and leapt onto the horses they had previously tethered there, withdrawing quickly to the second range of hills, Mont Blanc, Razor Back and Sugarloaf, all occupied by their fellow Boer commandos. 'We just saw their heels', remarked one soldier of the debacle.

The tactic was repeated as British forces swept their way towards the three *kopjes* only to find the canny Boers, after a brief but intense exchange of fire, again swiftly withdraw their forces and regroup at their next stronghold, Graspan, which they had selected at the location for the next engagement. British casualties of the battle of Belmont were seventy-five officers and soldiers killed and 223 wounded. Boer casualties were slightly higher, thus giving the British a Pyrrhic victory.

Two days later, Methuen was confronted by a considerable force of Boers occupying the top of the Graspan *kopje*. Adopting the same strategy of artillery bombardment followed by a frontal charge by the infantry, Methuen was met with the same result as at Belmont, the Boers withdrawing their forces before the numerically superior British troops could make use of their bayonets.

Methuen anticipated that the next encounter with the enemy would be at the crucial Modder River station, twenty miles further north. On 23 November Methuen reached the river to be confronted by a Boer force numbering 9,000 men under General Jacobus Herculaa de la Rey and General Piet Cronje. The Boers adopted a different strategy from Belmont and Graspan. Cronje and De la Rey reasoned that by firing from the top of a *kopje* downwards into the advancing British troops, the effective killing area of the Mausers was greatly weakened. De la Rey therefore ordered a five-mile trench to be dug stretching along the north banks of the Modder River and the river Riet on either side of the strategically important railway bridge. In front of the trench was open veldt offering no cover for advancing British troops.

The Guards, under General Henry Colville, were ordered to advance to the junction of the two rivers on the right of the railway bridge where they were confronted by De la Rey's commandos. Lieutenant Duberly's detachment was in the centre of the frontline advancing cautiously towards the Boer trench. As they came within 1,200 yards of the river they were met with murderous fire from the Mausers. The Guards continued their advance into the relentless fusillade until they were brought to a halt, still 1,000 yards from the river. Strength of numbers eventually won the day and British forces were able to cross the river, compelling the Boers to withdraw. British casualties were seventy killed and 413 wounded, whilst the Boers lost an estimated 150 men. In an official dispatch to the Queen, Methuen described the battle as 'the bloodiest of the century' and 'one of the hardest and most trying fights in the annals of the British army', in which his troops shelled the enemy 'out of their trenches and then charged'. The result, he concluded 'was terrible'.

The *New York Times* of 30 November 1899 carried a vivid report of this ten-hour battle. The headline read: 'METHUEN'S HEAVY LOSSES. British killed, 73, and wounded 372 at Modder River ... Another battle expected soon.'

After the battle, the Boers made another of their tactical withdrawals to Magersfontein Hill, which they began to strengthen, anticipating that this would be the site of the next confrontation. Methuen meanwhile waited for two weeks at the Modder River for reinforcements to arrive and

on 10 December he was ready to give the order for his forces, now swelled to nearly 13,000 men, to advance to the Magersfontein *kopje*.

The battle lasted the whole of 11 December 1899 and the result was even more disastrous than Modder River. Cronje's Boers and their smokeless Mausers efficiently cut down the British frontal assault, causing heavy casualties. The Grenadier Guards, in a support role, suffered only minor casualties. When the Boers opened artillery fire in late afternoon, British forces withdrew. It was a colossal defeat and brought to an end Methuen's command.

The misery was not yet over for the shattered British troops. They withdrew to the Modder River, exhausted and without food or water, to find the river littered with the corpses of men and horses, a fertile breeding ground for enteric fever against which the army had no defences. Hundreds of men died of the disease. Magersfontein was the second of three disastrous defeats suffered by the British army in the single week of 10–17 December 1899, the so-called 'Black Week'. The heavy defeat at Magersfontein led to a wholesale re-appraisal of British strategy. Methuen was removed and replaced by General Lord Roberts, who, with 25,000 reinforcements, took over command of the campaign. On 15 February 1900, three months after the defeat at Magersfontein, Kimberley was finally relieved by a cavalry division under Lieutenant General John French, after a siege lasting 124 days.

The siege of Ladysmith was finally lifted on 28 February 1900, after 118 days, by a relief column under Major Hubert Gough whose forces included the young Winston Churchill.

Lieutenant Duberly next saw action at Poplar Grove on 7 March 1900, at a critical stage of the war, when the demoralised Boers were decisively routed, allowing British forces to pursue the next stage of the campaign, to capture Bloemfontein, capital of the Orange Free State. The next obstacle in their way was at Driefontein, where a two-pronged attack by British cavalry and artillery caused the Boers to flee in disarray. Skirmishes at the Vet and Zand rivers followed but we next hear of Lieutenant Duberly when the Grenadier Guards were posted to the Transvaal in May and June 1900 and saw action at the Battle of Diamond Hill, which took place on 11 and 12 June 1900. Fourteen thousand British troops were pitted against a Boer force of 4,000 and the result was never in doubt. The Boers were quickly removed from their positions on top of the hill and forced to retreat. Lieutenant Duberly's fellow Staughton volunteer Private John Wakefield was present to celebrate the victory.

After the Battle of Diamond Hill, the Boers' last desperate throw of the dice, Lieutenant Duberly ended his military service in the South African Campaign. He was mentioned in despatches for conspicuous service by Lord Roberts in the *London Gazette* in 1902 and was awarded the Queen's medal with six clasps, and later the King's medal with two clasps. A clasp designated the battles in which the recipient had served. Six of Lieutenant Duberly's eight were awarded in the reign of Queen Victoria and the remaining two in the reign of her successor, King Edward VII.

The *St Neots Advertiser* paid fulsome tribute to Lieutenant Duberly, reporting on the warm reception that he had received upon his return from South Africa in August 1902. He was greeted at the station by a procession formed of brother officers. He was then borne by carriage to Great Staughton, which was appropriately decked out with bunting.

In May 1904 Lieutenant Duberly was appointed Captain and in July 1911, the year he resigned his commission, he was promoted to major. Three years later, on 31 July 1914, he married Millicent Florence Eleanor, née Wilson, Countess Cowley, daughter of Lord Nunburnholme.

The greatest killer of British troops in the South African Campaign was not a Mauser bullet but enteric (typhoid) fever. Of the 560,000 men who served in the South African Campaign, no fewer than 58,000 contracted the disease, of whom 8,000 perished, including several volunteers from Great Staughton. The epidemic reached its peak during the months of April to June 1900 when some 6,000 men died. The disaster prompted civil surgeons in Britain to volunteer for service. One such was Charles Gordon-Watson (1874–1949), son of Rev. H.G. Watson, who went out in 1899, serving in the Wynberg Hospital, Cape Town, before transferring to Kroonstad where he was on hand to deal with the great outbreak of typhoid during the spring and summer of 1900.

Another civil surgeon volunteer, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, in a letter to *The Times* of 6 July 1900, described the situation that confronted him and the other medical staff at the Langman Hospital, Bloemfontein. The outbreak of enteric fever, he wrote, was 'a calamity the magnitude of which had not been foreseen'. He recorded that in a single month '600 men were laid in the Bloemfontein cemetery'. The great mistake made by the British authorities, according to Conan Doyle, was not to insist that every man be inoculated against the disease. Inoculation would also have helped another Staughton man, an engineer rather than a serving soldier, who was to succumb to the disease at the end of 1900. He was William Stephen Watson, brother of Charles Gordon-Watson.